



HERE COMES THE SUN: TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AT WORK

EMMMA LAWLER outlines the importance of learning in the workplace as well as in traditional educational settings.

For library and information professionals working now, the traditional approach to professional development and tertiary study has had its day. These old pathways retain some value, but to maximise staff development we now need to look at what we can offer our staff at work. On-the-job project-based transformative learning is the key to libraries becoming the learning organisations we know they can be.

Creating a working environment that encourages real transformative professional development at work will foster a new generation of library and information professionals. They will have learned to be – and are supported to be – curious, courageous and clever. And they will enable their organisations to adapt to the constantly changing technological environment in which these organisations operate.

Investing in workplace learning is a lot like buying solar panels. The initial investment is high, but the returns

over time far outweigh that initial cost. Over time, as this transformative learning approach becomes business as usual, the output and success of staff will increase as they feel engaged, valued, creative and confident. It's these qualities in staff that make a great organisation that will attract, engage and retain talented staff.

What is a learning organisation and how do we get there?

In 21st-century workplaces with tight budgets and other constraints, not all levels of staff avail themselves of traditional learning and professional development opportunities. Sometimes these opportunities aren't even available to all staff, but those driven enough to seek them out, or who are already in higher-level positions, usually do take them up.

The skills and learning we need to undertake in the 21st century are constantly being reshaped. A learning organisation facilitates learning among its staff and continuously transforms itself. The skills that will equip libraries to adapt to an uncertain future are not skills that



libraries are traditionally comfortable with. We're much less comfortable with the softer skills that will enable us to adapt to change. Skills such as collective intelligence, emotional intelligence and negotiation are becoming fundamental to operating successfully in the 21st century.

These intangible skills are hard to learn and hard to teach. But they need to be developed within an organisation, role-modelled by leaders, and learned at work to transform the capabilities of everyone working in libraries. So why bother? And what does transformative learning actually look like?


Project-based learning, planning and play

Elements of project-based learning can be applied to workplace learning, especially for a team that is engaged predominantly with project work. If transformative learning at work is to succeed, then the project must be meaningful and have real outcomes, it should be guided by an expert, and it should enable staff to learn from, and build on, knowledge as a team.

In 2013, I led a new team tasked with making video content. We had very little idea of how to do it, but we gave it a red-hot go and this is what helped to make it happen:

- Applying design and production thinking – using tools such as Scrum (from Agile project methodology)
- Planning carefully and constantly communicating
- Encouraging a playful attitude – there is no wrong answer, try and you shall succeed, and remember to have fun along the way
- Creating safe spaces to fail and receive guidance – we held regular production meetings to share ideas and give and receive feedback
- Investing time and resources – getting strong leadership, guidance and backing from management
- Starting small – only one team or only one project
- Begging, borrowing, stealing – learn from others around you (we leaned heavily on Learning and Teaching staff for video production training and advice)

Libraries must challenge their leaders to seek out and give staff real opportunities at work that run alongside the traditional external training or conference approach. Learning by doing, experimenting and playing with tools and ideas engages staff in meaningful and transformative learning.

Library people are talented but they are all different; some are introverts and some are extroverts. Some will adapt, come along quickly and become advocates for this approach, and some will feel uncomfortable with these new skills. But the positive outcomes far outweigh the challenging aspects. It's the leader's role to harness the sun to energise their staff to produce – and believe in – their own energy. 

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